

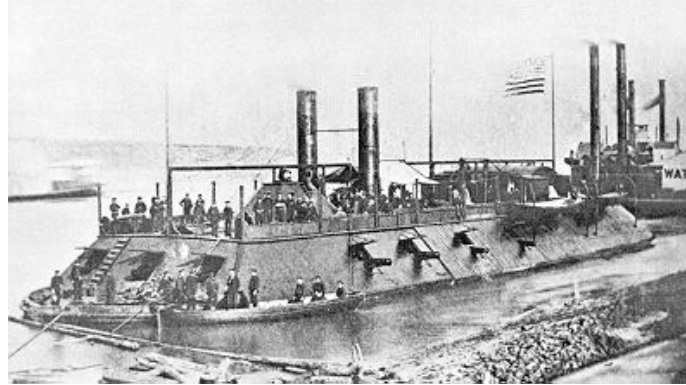
Vicksburg

National Park Service
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Vicksburg National Military Park



Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr. 1836-1924



USS Cairo

In the annals of American naval history, the name Selfridge does not stir the imagination quite like the legendary Farragut or Porter; yet Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr., was an intelligent and gifted officer who rose to the height of his profession.

Captain of the Ironclad Gunboat USS Cairo

The U.S.S. *Cairo*'s third commander was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1836. The son of a distinguished naval officer, Thomas Jr. was destined for a career in the Navy. He wrote in his *Memoirs*, "My own naval education may be said to have begun soon after emerging from the cradle." In 1854, Selfridge graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis at the head of his class, and by 1860 was promoted to lieutenant.

While serving aboard the wooden frigate U.S.S. *Cumberland*, Selfridge had his first encounter with an ironclad. On March 8, 1862, the C.S.S. *Virginia* claimed the *Cumberland* as one of her first victims. While shells from the rebel ironclad penetrated the *Cumberland*'s fragile hull and exploded among her crew, shots merely bounced off the *Virginia*'s 4"-thick armor. The *Cumberland* sank after the *Virginia* rammed her starboard side, taking two-thirds of her crew with her. Lt. Selfridge, in charge of the forward battery of six guns, saved himself by jumping from a gunport and swimming to a nearby launch. Selfridge wrote of the incident:

"Furious over the loss of the ship in which I had taken such intense pride, shivering with cold from soaking wet and scanty clothing, the reaction from the long endured, frightful, experiences of battle impelled me to tears, and I sobbed like a child."

This was the beginning of what proved to be a dramatic naval career for the young lieutenant.

Selfridge had the unique opportunity to serve as captain of the *Monitor* for four days following the famous ironclad battle, but was replaced with a permanent commander. He then spent two weeks in command of an experimental submarine called the *Alligator*. In August 1862, Selfridge was promoted to lieutenant commander and became the third captain of the ironclad gunboat U.S.S. *Cairo*. George Yost, the *Cairo*'s youngest crew member, noted the arrival of the twenty-six year-old commander in his journal:

"Friday Sept. 12th. At 1 P.M. we received on board Commander Selfridge (of the U.S. Frigate Cumberland) as our Captain...at 2 P.M. Capt. Selfridge made us a little speech in which he declared his intention of enforcing a rule heretofore unnoticed which was not to allow any profane swearing whoever broke this rule was to be severely punished."

During the first three months of Selfridge's command, the *Cairo* spent much of her time patrolling the Mississippi River. In November of 1862, the *Cairo* was detailed to an expedition being formed to attack Vicksburg. As a preliminary to this expedition, the ironclad was ordered to ascend the Yazoo and clear the river of Confederate torpedoes, or underwater mines. Shortly after 11:00 a.m. on December 12, 1862, U.S.S. *Cairo* struck two of these "infernal machines" and sank in twelve minutes. Selfridge wrote of the incident in his *Memoirs*:

"Two explosions occurred in quick succession, which seemed to lift the vessel out of the water, and notwithstanding every effort to keep her afloat, she sank in twelve minutes, leaving nothing but the tops of her chimneys showing above six fathoms of water. All hands were saved."

Though no lives were lost, the sinking of the *Cairo* earned Selfridge considerable criticism. Admiral Porter accused him of disobeying orders adding, "My own opinion is that due caution was not observed." The admiral, apparently impressed with Selfridge's aggressiveness, however, later withdrew his censure: "I can see in it nothing more than one of the accidents of war arising from a zealous disposition on the part of the commanding officer to perform his duty."

Selfridge was then placed in command of the timberclad gunboat, *Conestoga*. On March 8, 1864, exactly two years after the loss of the *Cumberland*, the *Conestoga* collided with the steamer *General Price* and sank in about four minutes. "Thus for the third time in the war, I had had my ship suddenly sunk under me," Selfridge wrote. He added, "It is a strange coincidence that the names of these three ships all begin with the letter 'C.'" Admiral Porter, in some disgust, said, "Well, Selfridge, you do not seem to have much luck with the top of the alphabet." His next command was the ironclad *Osage*.

Selfridge finished his war career commanding the gunboat *Huron* on an expedition against Ft. Fisher. Twenty-nine years old at war's end, the young naval officer spent the entire Civil War on active service, mostly in combat zones. A fellow officer wrote, "Selfridge...has lived a good while for a young man." In 1869, he was promoted to the rank of commander and spent the remainder of his naval career traveling the world. Selfridge retired with the rank of rear-admiral in 1898, ending a career of 47 years in the Navy. He died on February 4, 1924, in Washington, D.C., two days before his 88th birthday.